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THE DEVELOPMENT OF GOOD TASTE IN READING¹

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In no other subject than literature is so small a proportion of the available material studied in the schools. For this reason, if for no other, the study of literature in the schools, elementary or secondary, can have for its purpose neither the acquisition of useful information, as has the study of geography, perhaps, nor the attainment of skill, as has the study of arithmetic or of composition. The purpose of the study of literature is the development of good taste in reading, so that the pupil upon completion of the school course in the subject shall, in some measure at least, recognize the worthy and choose it for his own reading.

That the pupil upon completion of his school course does recognize the worthy and choose it for his own reading is challenged on every hand. We must admit that the reading of the average school-trained young man or woman of today is made up about as follows: a daily newspaper; the *Saturday Evening Post*; some modern novels. Altogether apart from the statements of others, no teacher of English can dare to characterize this as a reading program exhibiting discriminating taste. A reading program of this character, indeed, means nothing less than failure to make the study of literature serve its purpose—namely, the development of good taste in reading. That failure in this respect may be due in part to low taste on the part of the general public, to certain moral conditions, or to other influences outside the schools' control, is undoubtedly true. These things we as teachers, however, have no exceptional power to alter. It is for us to consider whether or not the schools are doing the most possible for the development of reading taste.

¹ A paper read before the Kansas Association of Teachers of English.

What relation does the young man's or the young woman's reading bear to the literature that he or she studied in school, particularly in the secondary school? Everywhere except in the school is it recognized that the daily newspaper represents a practically new type of literature, a new and pervasive influence upon the progress of the world. But, as Professor Scott of the University of Michigan indicated in his closing address as president of the National Council of Teachers of English, the newspaper has been largely excluded from the classes in English. Is it strange that the sensational, untruthful newspaper is as likely to be chosen by the young man or woman as the newspaper that stands for the highest ideals of constructiveness and progress?

The acquaintance with magazines made by the student in the literature classes of the average high school is, if any is made at all, with the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, which are taught as though it were a desideratum to form a permanent taste for them. Brilliant as they are, appreciation of these publications requires an intimate knowledge of eighteenth-century life. Suppose the pupils can be given this knowledge, what has been gained? Why should any sane man or woman want the reading of growing boys and girls to center in the political and social life of one of the most commonplace and sordid eras in English history? In most cases, however, the pupil gets neither the knowledge of eighteenth-century life nor a taste for the writings themselves, and he reads the *Saturday Evening Post*, in which he regularly skips the editorial page. A professor of English said to me recently, "My students seem to take no interest in modern problems, with the exception of modern dances." Yet there has been no period in human history in which more has been written on current problems than is being published in magazines today. The air is alive with constructive thinking, the thinking which is molding the age, the thinking by which the age will be measured in history. On social constructive thought the greatest literature of the world has always been based. Literature is a social product, and any great literature that is being written or that is immediately to be written will be based on the problems and ideals that are absorbing the attention of the world's thinkers today. But the literature course of the secondary school looks back, in its

reading of periodical writings, to the dead issues of two hundred years ago. The pupil fails to appreciate these issues and seeks no modern ones.

The book study done in the secondary-school course in literature includes, as everyone knows, several novels of recognized worth, a considerable amount of poetry, and several plays of Shakespeare. To the authors of these works most of the pupils in their later reading do not return. They remember the names; they do not renew their acquaintance with the writers. That this condition is due to a sort of pathological depravity on the part of the pupils, as some teachers and scholars seem to think, I do not believe. It would be a fine thing if every one of the pupils could be led to read, in his later life, every word of Chaucer and every word of Shakespeare. The question, however, is not one of value, but of practicability. Let me ask you, as teachers of English, to answer to yourselves these two questions: Have you read all of Chaucer? Have you read the thirty-seven plays that constitute the Shakespeare dramatic canon? I believe there are few teachers of English anywhere who can answer these questions in the affirmative. Why don't we do this reading? We are fond of saying, truly enough, that Chaucer and Shakespeare are universal in their human appeal. The fact is simply this: Most people do not feel the universal appeal in literature unless it touches, in an apparent way, the things with which they are familiar. Through experience in life and in books the literary scholar reaches a point where he is familiar with the things, however remote from ordinary concerns, that literature may touch. That the adolescent child should reach this point is too much to expect. Yet the literature course in the secondary school presumes this by presenting for the pupil's study literature written largely from a point of view remote from the pupil's experience—remote often from any specific present-day experience—and expecting the pupil to get therefrom a taste for good reading.

The actual result is that, except in rare cases, the pupil in later life does not turn back to the authors whose works he read in school. He turns instead to modern literature. Now, if he turned to the best of modern literature, the school course would have accomplished something in the way of developing a discriminating literary taste.

As a matter of fact, however, he does not know the names of the first-class modern writers. The school has not given him the training that enables him to choose between arrant trash and real literature. I recently asked seventy-five college students, chiefly graduates of high schools in this state, to write the names of as many living playwrights, living poets, and living novelists as possible; likewise, the names of as many deceased writers of the classes mentioned as possible. Most of them could name very glibly the deceased writers whose works fill the secondary-school course in literature—though I know, from personal acquaintance with the students, that they do not read these writers. Among the deceased playwrights, the majority, naturally enough, named only Shakespeare. At the present time, so the best critics believe, we are entering upon a new era of dramatic literature. Yet over two-thirds of these students could not name a single living playwright, and of those who did name playwrights, only three mentioned any of reputation or importance. A third of the students could name no living poet, and if we should exclude Walt Mason, James Whitcomb Riley, and Ella Wheeler Wilcox—not that I would class these together—there would be almost none left. Nearly all could name several living novelists, but among all the names there was but one really recognized by critics, that of Mrs. Humphry Ward, named by two students. The names of William Butler Yeats, Percy Mackaye, Gerhart Hauptmann, and Maurice Maeterlinck—men who are making the dramatic literature of today; of Alfred Noyes, Robert Bridges, Rabindranath Tagore, Alice Meynell, Austin Dobson, Bliss Carman, Edith Thomas, Richard Le Gallienne—poets whose work compares favorably with the current poetry of any period in history; of William Dean Howells, William De Morgan, Thomas Hardy, Frances Hodgson Burnett, James Lane Allen, Edith Wharton—novelists whose work demands the attention of thinking people—all these names were absolutely unknown to these seventy-five school-trained young men and women. Is it any wonder that the suggestive musical comedy, the doggerel of the newspaper editorial page, the salacious and untruthful novel absorb attention?

A condition such as this demands a remedy. That the remedy is to be found in better teaching I do not believe; for I do not

believe the fault is in the teaching. It is rather in the course itself, which is shaped by the college-entrance requirements. The fulfilment of these requirements does give a certain amount of literary information, but taste, rather than information, is what is wanted for further reading, whether in college or elsewhere. So far as the college work is concerned, I had rather have a student who did not know that Shakespeare or Milton ever lived and yet who turned unerringly to the best in modern literature than a student—and there are many such—who had read play after play of Shakespeare, poem after poem of Milton, yet turned at the close of day to the latest novel of Robert Chambers. In due time the student of good taste will turn to Shakespeare and Milton; but there is no guaranty that the student whose literary training consists of information will ever turn to any writer of genuine worth.

That all the college-entrance requirements in English are a failure in developing taste I should not think for a moment of asserting. But some which are intrinsically the best are a failure with young pupils, and for these should be substituted literature that breathes the problems and the culture and the ideals of today. Let some newspaper be examined in class, as Professor Scott suggested in the address to which I have already referred. Let some first-class current magazine articles be discussed; let the pupils develop interest in the feminist movement, in labor problems, in socialism, in the questions that are being discussed in the twentieth rather than the eighteenth century, questions on which literature is going more and more to be based. Introduce into the course a number of the best modern novels, the best modern poems, the best modern plays. The pupil appreciates thought and emotion, not literary structure. John Galsworthy's *Justice* is to the pupil a better picture of actual life than the *Merchant of Venice*. Nicholas Vachel Lindsay's poem, "General Booth Enters Heaven," will be appreciated more by the pupils than any eighteenth-century poem that I know.

In a paper as brief as this I cannot outline a definite course of reading; I can do little more than emphasize the thought that, to develop a taste for good reading, we must present literature written from a point of view akin to the pupil's experience. The pupil's

horizon constantly enlarges, and greater and more remote things enter his experience. As this occurs, literature more remote in point of view may be introduced. This is merely following the method of modern education—proceeding from the near to the remote. Heretofore we have proceeded, in teaching literature, from the remote to the near, and have never reached the near. Such rearrangement of the secondary-school course in literature as will include and emphasize the product of modern thought and ideals will be in line with modern pedagogical method, and will consequently help to accomplish the pedagogical purpose of the course—the development of good taste in reading.